DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 756 EA 015 945

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TITLE Don't Be Duped by Industry's Mystique. The Endpaper.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 2p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Executive Educator; v4 n11 p46 Nov 1982

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Principles; *Business Administration; *Educational Administration; Educational Objectives; Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; Opinion Papers; School Business Relationship
IDENTIFIERS PF Project

ABSTRACT

Management approaches used by business do not necessarily work in education. Administrators must beware of trying to find a quick remedy for education's ills by adopting business management principles. Attempts of this kind were made between 1910 and 1930 and were found to be unsuccessful. The major reason is that schools and businesses are two endeavors aimed at producing different results. If we want to develop students with values, empathy, problem-solving skills, and the ability to cope wth a complex world, then we cannot adopt a production-line approach to schooling. Sound business practices make sense when purchasing supplies, but it is a mistake to apply them to decisions about teachers or the curriculum. (DC)

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The Endpaper

by Theodore J. Kowalski

Don't be duped by industry's mystique

IN HARD TIMES, it's tempting to reach for quick fixes for education's ills. And plenty of hucksters are around to promote snake oil that administrators are supposed to swallow: Discipline again will bloom in schools when you recreate strict rules; poor student achievement can be solved by focusing solely on the basics; and management of public schools can be turned around by adopting business as a model for operations. It's this last notion that really gets my goat.

What galls me about promoting the industrial management mystique is that it isn't even *new*. Raymond E. Callahan, in his 1962 book *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, looked at the misguided attempts of educators between 1910 and 1930 to apply business techniques to public schools. But many educators apparently have forgotten Callahan's point—that business approaches don't necessarily work in education—and again are calling for administrators to "make schools businesslike."

I'm not saying that people don't have a right to be critical about public schools and to expect that tax dollars be spent wisely. They do. But the suggestion that schools can be run like businesses is a generalization of the grossest kind. Too often we hear would-be superintendents claiming to have plans to introduce corporate efficiency into schools. School board members running for office will puff out their chests and propose to run schools the way they run their lumberyards or their medical practices—with a sharp eye on the bottom line. But what do these people actually mean? Will they develop new accounting methods or institute time-and-motion studies into the classroom? Do educators really want to paddle about in the alphabet soup of M.B.O. and Z.B.B.? If so, let's not forget that many techniques used in industrial management have been proved *counterproductive* and that the rate of business failure in the U.S. makes schools look like citadels of sound management.

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The major reason schools shouldn't imitate businesses, of course, is that the two endeavors are aimed at producing completely different results. The business mystique is appealing because it emphasizes bottom-line efficiency, but educators must resist the notion that they can adapt the values and methods they use in buying floor wax to the values and methods they use in making decisions about whether a music program stays in the curriculum. To ignore sound business practices when purchasing supplies is a business error, but to use so-called business strategies to reach decisions about teachers or the curriculum is an even greater *management* mistake.

If we want the schools to develop human beings who can make decisions based on values and empathy for other people, then we can't adopt a production-line approach to schooling. If we want to educate students to solve problems and cope with a complex world, administrators must adopt a system of education that promotes personal growth as well as acquisition of basic skills.

That goal is easy to enunciate and difficult to accomplish, because running a program that fosters student growth and skills requires a unique insight about what is frivolous and what is basic in a child's education.

Unfortunately, no simple formula exists, no Harvard Business School book of case studies can be applied to resolve the perplexing issues of education. What we *do* have, however, is an extensive body of knowledge that has been developed through research and through observation of classroom practices. The rub is finding ways to apply these models and methods while considering all the volatile human factors inherent in any community of students, teachers, and parents. Again, corporations have the comfort of knowing that success is measured in relatively simple terms: profit. Each business, no matter what its service or product, has black ink as a goal. But schools have the more difficult (and gratifying) task of producing citizens who can survive, produce, and thrive in an ever-changing society—of educating students when parents, administrators, teachers, and kids each have slightly different ideas of what education ought to be.

Public education might well need a new direction, but that course must be set by school executives who are willing to promote growth as much as "profit." It must come from superintendents and principals who understand the process of education as well as they understand management theory and who possess the expertise to synthesize the two without abusing either.

For those who remain unconvinced, go back and look at Callahan's 1962 study. It shows that the reason business values were pushed on education between 1910 and 1930 was that educators were doing a lousy job and schools became vulnerable to public pressure. If Babbittry could produce a nation of cities, railroads, and Ford Motors, this reasoning went, then surely business practices could produce a better breed of student. It didn't then, and it won't now. So beware of those who want to make schools more businesslike. These people either are naive, or they have mastered what C.P. Snow called the art of "sending the old familiar phrases reverberating around the room without laughing." ■

EA015945

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THE EXECUTIVE EDUCATOR
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